



## EUROPEAN UNION

### **OSCE Permanent Council No. 1303 Vienna, 18 February 2021**

#### **EU Statement in response to the report by the Chief Observer of the OSCE Observer Mission at two Russian Checkpoints on the Russian-Ukrainian border, Ambassador György Varga**

Madam Chair, the European Union warmly welcomes Ambassador Varga to the Permanent Council and expresses its gratitude for his report. We commend you, Ambassador, and your team for the valuable work that you continue to carry out under challenging circumstances including those lately imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. We commend you, in particular, for the measures taken to ensure the safety and duty of care of the Mission members, and we are pleased to learn that you have not recorded any COVID cases among your staff.

Madam Chair, we believe that effective and comprehensive monitoring of the Russia-Ukraine state border is instrumental in improving the security situation and finding a sustainable political solution to the conflict, in line with OSCE principles and commitments, and in full respect of the sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and independence of Ukraine. We recall that the Minsk Protocol calls for permanent monitoring of the border and verification by the OSCE, and that the Minsk Package of Measures includes the commitment to reinstate full Ukrainian control over its entire international border.

It was also for this reason all EU Member States joined the group of 35 OSCE participating States that co-sponsored the draft MC decision “On the OSCE Permanent Monitoring and Verification of the Areas Adjacent to the Ukrainian-

Russian State Border which are Temporarily Not Under Control of the Ukrainian Government”. We regret that there was no agreement on it during the Tirana Ministerial Council, due to the unconstructive position of one participating State.

Ambassador Varga, we regret to learn from your report that the freedom of movement of the Observer Teams continues to be heavily restricted by the Russian authorities and that the use of any observation tools, even binoculars, is arbitrarily forbidden. In your report, you underline that such restrictions hinder the Mission’s capability to observe “certain situations” directly. This only increases our concerns about what is being hidden from the international community by Russia, especially as the SMM continues to be systematically denied access to border areas by Russia-backed armed formations. Moreover, the mandate as well as the very limited size of your Mission do not allow for comprehensive monitoring. We reiterate our call for a significant expansion of the Mission to all border crossings on the Russia-Ukraine state border currently not under control of the Ukrainian government as well as between these border crossings. We would like to stress that the current limitations run counter to the confidence-building purpose that this Mission was intended for. The removal of the existing obstacles, including to the geographical expansion of the Mission, would be a welcome and much needed signal of a more constructive approach by the Russian Federation towards the peaceful settlement of the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine.

The European Union welcomes the decision of the Permanent Council of 21 January to extend the Observer Mission by a further period of four months. However, we share your view, Ambassador Varga, that a longer mandate cycle would enhance the effectiveness of the Mission’s operations and reduce the administrative burden of each renewal, which as you note has been further aggravated by the current COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, we reiterate our support for an extension of the mandate cycle for longer periods ensuring a more stable functioning of the Mission. Equally, we urge the Russian Federation, as the host country, to take the long overdue step of assigning the Mission proper legal status in order to enable it to operate to its full potential and to secure legal protection for the Observers.

We welcome and encourage the further development of the cooperation and the exchange of information between the Observer Mission and the SMM, which is certainly highly beneficial for both Missions.

Ambassador, we are grateful to you and your team for your hard work in such constraining conditions. We appreciate your regular briefings and hope to welcome you back soon to the Permanent Council.

The Candidate Countries REPUBLIC of NORTH MACEDONIA\*, MONTENEGRO\* and ALBANIA\*, and the EFTA countries ICELAND, LIECHTENSTEIN and NORWAY, members of the European Economic Area, as well as UKRAINE, the REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA, GEORGIA and SAN MARINO align themselves with this statement.

\* Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.